



IN-DEPTH

## On Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, the Kenhté:ke Seed Sanctuary preserves not just plants, but culture and language, too

In caring for a 40-year-old collection of 300 seed varieties, the non-profit Ratinenhayén:thos aims to strengthen local food security and revitalize Indigenous connections to the land



By Louis Bockner  
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Blue Cayuga flint corn, left, is one of the rare heirloom crops being revitalized by the Kenhté:ke Seed Sanctuary. Because of the space required to successfully grow out seed corn, this and a yellow sweet corn, right, are the only two varieties grown in the garden, which is on Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory.

Photo: Louis Bockner / The Narwhal

The Kenhté:ke Seed Sanctuary is in the heart of Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, just west of Kingston, Ont. It is home to a 40-year-old living collection of almost 300 seed varieties, including rare heirloom crops like blue Cayuga flint corn and ancient ones like Jacob's cattle bean, a red and white legume dating back to the 1700s.

Since 2019, the collection has been cared for by Ratinenhayén:thos, an Mohawk-led non-profit whose name means "they are farmers of seeds" in Kanyen'kéha, chosen because it denotes a strong spiritual and cultural connection that grounds the organization's work in community and place.

Here, Kahéhtoktha, a founding member of Ratinenhayén:thos, talks about the sanctuary and the importance of seed saving.



Kahéhtoktha believes that people have a commitment to seeds, founded in the ancient teachings of her nation. "To use them, to respect them, to keep the seeds if need be and to interact with them on different levels," she says. "It's really very spiritual, land based and relationship based." Photo: Louis Bockner / The Narwhal

## Can you tell the history of the seed collection and how it came to be in the hands of Ratinenhayén:thos?

We received the seed collection in April 2019 in a seed repatriation ceremony that was planned by Ratinenhayén:thos, the [Kingston Area Seed System Initiative](#) and the Sisters of Providence. The Sisters had the collection for 20 years. When they began they were taking care of the collection themselves but many of the sisters are quite elderly, so as time passed they hired a professional gardener, Cate Henderson, and we've also adapted that model.

Prior to that, Robert and Carol Mouck had formed the collection at their farm in Napanee, which is fairly close to here, so many of the seeds are indigenous. Our connection to these seeds goes back to our creation story, which is the foundation of our origins, our language and our culture. That's how deeply significant the seeds are to us. To recognize that these seeds were once ours and are returned to us. We're really glad to have them back and to be taking care of them.



When the seed collection passed from the Sisters of Providence to Ratinenhayén:thos, a traditional wampum belt was made to signify the transition and intentions of both parties to care for the seeds. It took months to make and was a collaborative effort by members of the Tyendinaga community, including youths, elders and Ratinenhayén:thos board members. Photo: Louis Bockner / The Narwhal

## **What does “rematriation” mean to you?**

It seems that when people talk about artifacts and things that are being returned to their Indigenous owners, they often use the word “repatriation.” But “rematriation,” for me anyway, is about a spiritual, land-based relationship and connection to our Mother Earth. I think it’s also about returning women to their prominent leadership roles and responsibilities of taking care of the Earth and transferring cultural knowledge, language and skills. In this context it’s seeds, foodways and reconnecting to our spirituality and sacred ecology.

When we embarked on our relationship with The Sisters around the seed collection, it was actually them that put forward the word “rematriation.” It made me realize that these women are probably feminists, that they really value women’s contributions in society and that the way they live also embodies a relationship to the Earth. Caring for seeds, caring for the next generation, that was some of our common ground early on which made it really special.

I think Native people generally are a little bit afraid of nuns and sisters because of residential schools and things like that. We were careful as we approached the relationship. We were really careful to be respectful and to not pre-judge anything or be too influenced by the pain that people had experienced. We just wanted to try to have a fresh start with these women. They’re elderly as well and we respect our elders. We care about them and recognize them to be an important part of our society. I think that deep respect and reverence for them and who they are was surprising to them. We were trying to build on a foundation of peace, respect and love.

## **How are the seeds stored? What are some of the challenges around caring for such a large collection?**

Right now the seeds are stored at the public library, which is located in the heart of our community. We wanted them to be in a public space and also in a secure environment, but in the long term we hope to have our own space for storing the seeds. The temperature that we like as human beings isn’t always the ideal temperature for seeds. Some seeds are kept at **the sanctuary** in the seed drying room because they can withstand a bit of fluctuation in temperature.







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Top: A map of the sacred cosmology that dictates the sanctuary's yearly schedule of the Kenhté:ke Seed Sanctuary. Bottom: These seeds are kept in packets or mason jars in a drying room on site, but most of the 300 varieties are stored at a nearby public library. Photos: Louis Bockner / The Narwhal

Also, it takes a lot of resources and a professional gardener. It's a full, year-long process to look after all the seeds. You go from planting a seed in the greenhouse to then transferring it outside. Then it's there through the growing season before being harvested. At that point some seeds are taken into the seed drying room to cure.

It takes time and it takes a lot of educating people about this seed conservation work and all the things that are needed on site in order to care for it. A greenhouse and potting shed. A place to store equipment, and also an office and things like that. Eventually we hope to have all those things in place and that they can then be used into the future to keep curating and expanding the collection with more indigenous varieties.

## **Can you share some success stories and heartbreaks?**

I feel like this can be answered on so many different levels. One, with Ratinenhayén:thos and the board. Another with the gardener and the volunteers and being able to bring everyone together to establish the seed sanctuary and get it off the ground. All of the energy and work that has been poured into it is a success story. Even the fact that seed conservation is virtually unheard of and yet so valuable and so important.

Some of our success and heartbreaks have been trying to raise the funding for fencing the gardens, to protect the things that we're growing from wildlife. We did experience a few losses from feathered friends and four-legged friends. Thankfully it didn't break us. In some jars there's only one or two seeds and in other jars there are many seeds. It's like that across the entire collection.

We really want to ensure that we have things in place to protect the rare varieties such as the Cayuga flint corn that we grew this season. This corn is newly brought into the care of the collection and is very distinct, old and lesser known. It's less available to people in seed and even less available in quantities to be eaten, so this is really important to Indigenous people. When we rematriate that seed back into communities, it will help improve the seed, the food system and the chance that this variety will survive for many, many generations. That is the role that we play.

It's something that we're really excited to celebrate because we are the first Indigenous seed sanctuary that we know of in Canada.





• Ratinenhayén:thos communications director Luke Jeffries.



• Youth volunteer Emma Brant, daughter of board member Jennifer Brant.





Chloe

• Maracle is the sanctuary's first paid intern, working with gardener Cate Henderson.



• Roberta

Green, a graduate of an ecosystems management program, studies the relationship between the sanctuary and its environment.

## How does the sanctuary help the Tyendinaga community build resilience and connection to the land?

I love that word, resilience. I think we have a lot of resilience already, which can only be strengthened by our further connection to the land and increasing our relationships with the sacred ecology. I think a big part of the resiliency building that is happening here is that we are sharing seed-saving education for our present and future generations. There's been a disruption in the flow of this information and it's caused a lot of ill health, physically and overall.

At the seed sanctuary, and in all that we do, it's part of our mission to follow the Haudenosaunee cosmology. It asks us to honour all of what we know, all of the teachings that we have been given about who we are and how we're supposed to live. When we increase access to traditional seeds, more people have the opportunity to grow them, taste them and incorporate food, like Cayuga flint corn, back into their diet.

In so many ways it's really important. It's always reinforcing our language, it's always reinforcing our culture. This work is part of cultural revitalization and it's part of language revitalization. It's the revitalization of our food ways and our spirituality through these activities. I do love that resilience. It makes me feel really happy.



Chloe Maracle holds magpie beans — a variety that was first cultivated in 1909. Photo: Louis Bockner / The Narwhal

## **What are your visions for the future of Kenhté:ke and Ratinenhayén:thos?**

I think as we're building up our capacity to care for the collection, we hope to expand the gardens and our internship program. Some people have already come forward and offered seeds from their personal collections that they're concerned about and would like to see continued because of their food value or their place in our culture.

We're planning larger grow-outs of the seeds as well. That's important because when you can have a larger grow-out population, you're strengthening the genetics of that plant and that species. As an example, a proper grow-out of corn should have 200 plants because more plants means more genetic diversity and therefore greater genetic resilience. Some of the foods we grow we've never eaten because there aren't enough seeds yet. That's a really horrible thought isn't it? I think every youth deserves to taste this corn and to recognize how valuable it was to our people.

In our view, something as important as our food source should be nationalized. Across the country, other First Nations or regions should have something like this. It would be great if they worked with Native People because much of our diet is Indigenous even though we've lost that connection. Native People have made lots of contributions to the food system and I think we still have a lot to contribute. There's a lot that isn't known or understood because we've sort of been left out of that equation for a while.

There were already gardens and beautiful food resources here, but through colonization [settlers] planted a garden over top of it and gave [the crops] different names. That kept people from being able to recognize what came from the Indigenous Peoples of these lands.



Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory is home to about 3,000 residents and is just west of Kingston, Ont. Photo: Louis Bockner / The Narwhal